



Edible Native Plants

VOLUNTEER MASTER NATURALIST EXCURSIONS

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Prickly Pear Cactus

FREC & Wells Mills County Park

Eastern Prickly Pear (*Opuntia humifusa*) has the largest range of any cactus in the United States and can be found from New Mexico and Montana east to Florida and Massachusetts.

This cactus grows in open, dry areas, often on calcareous rock or thin soils. The roots need to be dry during winter to prevent rot, so well drained sites are necessary.

“Nopales” (Spanish for prickly pear) fruit & pads are edible. They are covered in glochids which are like little hair-like splinters that can stick into your skin and are very painful and very hard to see. When harvesting prickly pear, you must protect your hands. The glochids can easily be burned off over an open flame.





Cranberry

Webs Mills Bog & Double Trouble State Park

Cranberries (*Vaccinium macrocarpon*) are a low growing, evergreen sub-shrub ground cover. They have a fine root system that grows in the upper 4 to 6 inches of the soil. These roots depend on mycorrhizal associations to absorb nutrients and are able to withstand long periods under water in the winter, a genetic trait of many wetland species.



South Jersey Leni-Lenape tribes called them "ibimi," or bitter berry. The early German and Dutch settlers named them cranberry because the blossom resembles the head of a crane.

Cranberry culture started at Double Trouble Village during the Civil War, when cleared Atlantic White Cedar swamps were converted into cranberry bogs. The State is seeking a cranberry farmer to maintain and harvest the bogs as the farmers have all retired and there will be no harvest this year.

Wintergreen

Wells Mills County Park & Jake's Branch County Park

Also known as eastern Teaberry and Checkerberry, *Gaultheria procumbens* was once the source of all wintergreen flavoring for candies and gum before scientists began to produce it synthetically.

These low growing plants form creeping mats of glossy green foliage that turns red to bronze in winter. Wintergreen is a forest evergreen plant that performs best in light to full shade in moist, acidic soils.

The bright red berrylike fruits, sometimes called deerberries, are edible. The leaves can be steeped to make tea to alleviate rheumatic symptoms, headache, fever, sore throat, and various aches and pains because it metabolizes into salicylic acid, the NSAID we know as aspirin.



Beach Plum

Double Trouble State Park & Island Beach State Park

Prunus maritima is a low, spreading, native shrub indigenous to north eastern maritime forests and is used by coastal wildlife. Tolerant of salt spray and saline soils, they grow about 6' tall and wide in these harsh conditions and are long lived.

The white flowers bloom later than other varieties of cultivated plums so they avoid late frosts and common plum pests and diseases. The fruit is popular for jams, jellies and pies.

Beach plums offer dune stabilization for sensitive coastal ecosystems. The edible fruit, which ripens from late August through September, ranges from .5" to 1" in diameter. The fruit can be red, purple, deep blue, and, rarely, yellow. The plum has a tart acidic flesh.



A close-up photograph of a blueberry branch. The branch is covered with vibrant green, lanceolate leaves. At the end of the branch, there is a cluster of small, white, bell-shaped flowers. The background is a soft, out-of-focus purple, suggesting other flowers or foliage.

Blueberry

Cattus Island County Park

For centuries, Native Americans gathered *Vaccinium* berries or “star berries” (the blossom end of each berry forms the shape of a perfect five-pointed star) from forests and fields and ate them fresh or dried them for later use. They also would burn the fields to kill off unwanted insects and weeds. In the early 1800s, European settlers gathered wild blueberries which remained a purely local crop until the Civil War.

High bush blueberry plants grow to 6’ and occur naturally in the understory of eastern forests. The plants send out underground stems or rhizomes. The bushes are resistant to most pests and diseases, and can produce for up to 20 years.

Blueberries thrive in soil that is acidic, situated in full sun. The blueberry is a shallow-rooted plant. Therefore, it requires a soil that holds moisture, but also drains well and doesn’t stay wet. In a home garden, apply mulch to keep shallow blueberry root systems moist.

